



STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ROBERT MENENDEZ

August 1, 2018

Violence against Afghan Religious Minorities

Today I would like to raise concerns about violence perpetrated against religious minorities in Afghanistan, particularly the Sikh and Hindu communities.

One month ago today, on July 1<sup>st</sup>, a suicide bomber attacked a crowd of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus as they gathered to meet with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on his visit to Jalalabad. At least 19 innocent civilians lost their lives, and 10 more were wounded. The attack also claimed the life of Awtar Singh Khalsa, the only Sikh candidate running in Afghanistan's upcoming parliamentary elections, and Rawail Singh, a prominent community activist.

Of the 19 killed, 17 belonged to the minority Sikh and Hindu religious groups.

I condemn this cowardly and heinous attack, and all those like it in the strongest possible terms. The Islamic State in Afghanistan claimed responsibility for the July 1<sup>st</sup> attack, and multiple attacks on civilian targets since then. It is impossible to overstate the depravity of this group that resorts to killing innocent people when it fails to otherwise advance its cause.

We cannot allow attacks such as this on civilians to pass unremarked, nor can we ignore violence specifically targeted toward Afghanistan's diverse religious minorities. Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan have long faced systemic discrimination, economic marginalization, and, as this latest attack only serves to further illustrate, unspeakable violence. Members of Sikh and Hindu communities report facing prejudice, harassment, bullying of children, and attacks from militant groups; disproportionate denial of their rights in Afghan courts; and even interference in their efforts to cremate the remains of their dead and peacefully adhere to other tenets of their faiths. Only a few places of worship remain available to Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan, many of whom face discrimination so severe that they choose to leave the country.

For his part, Mr. Khalsa's candidacy was a testament to the strength and resiliency of Afghan Sikhs who, even in the face of unrelenting hardship, remain dedicated to their country's democratic future. After last month's attack in Jalalabad, that kind of political engagement has been dealt a terrible blow.

The recent and ongoing attacks against Sikhs and Hindus come against a broader backdrop of sustained violence in Afghanistan. According to recent

figures from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, more Afghan civilians were killed in the first six months of 2018 – 1,692 deaths – than in *any other* six-month period over the last ten years. This figure demonstrates the continuing devastation caused by the past 17 years of war in Afghanistan, and the need for the United States and our partners in the international community to redouble efforts toward reaching a negotiated political settlement that can bring this long war to an end. Without peace in Afghanistan, the scourges of terrorist and insurgent violence, illegal narcotics trafficking, corruption, and limited government capacity to deliver justice and other public services will remain. And the Afghan people will continue to suffer.

All Afghans, of all beliefs, stand to benefit from the end of bloodshed. Cowardly attacks against religious minorities such as the one that took place in Jalalabad only serve to damage prospects for a peace that can benefit all.

The Jalalabad attack is also a stark reminder of the sectarian violence facing religious minorities in many parts of South Asia. Across the region, members of minority religious groups are being denied their basic human rights and the ability to live free from discrimination or violence. Attacks like the one in Jalalabad underscore the urgent need for governments in the region to hold perpetrators

accountable, and to enact laws and policies that foster tolerance, protect minorities' rights, and respect individual freedoms.

America is also home to many Sikh and Hindu communities living in every U.S. state, who, like so many minority groups in our diverse country, have played a positive role in the social, cultural, and economic development of the United States. In my home state of New Jersey, I am reminded every day of how much better off we all are for the contributions of Sikh and Hindu communities to our great state and nation. This is despite the fact that individuals in the United States of South Asian heritage and representing diverse faiths have faced attacks on account of their identity, including harassment, discrimination in employment and schooling, or even violent hate crimes, such as the devastating mass shooting in Oak Creek Wisconsin Sikh Gurdwara in 2012.

Just as we as a country will not stand for religious intolerance at home, we must not fail to speak out against it abroad. Respect for religious and other basic human freedoms worldwide is a core American value – one that bears repeating whenever and wherever those freedoms are threatened.

In closing, I will say it again – I condemn the July 1<sup>st</sup> attack against Afghan Sikh and Hindu civilians, and any individual or group that would harm innocent people based on their peaceful religious beliefs. We stand in solidarity with religious minorities in Afghanistan, in South Asia, and around the world.